Accomplishing Cross Cultural Competence in Youth Development Programs

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Understanding the cultures of the youth we serve requires more than words and good intentions. The journey toward cultural competence requires the willingness to experience, learn from those experiences, and act (Haley, 1999).

As public educators and practitioners of youth development, we have known for some time now that the educator must possess several competencies to be considered effective. For the public educator, some of the competencies include:

- Judgment,
- Improvisation,
- Conversation,
- Human qualities,
- Expert knowledge,
- Knowledge of organizational systems,
- Sound research and management practices,
- Skill, and
- Professional commitment.

For the youth development worker, such as an Extension youth worker, those competencies have also included an understanding of:

- Youth and adult growth and development, and
- Learning strategies.

These are just some of the competencies necessary for public educators and youth development workers. Changing demographics have for decades yielded the need to add one more competency to the list:

- Cultural competence.

By the year 2050, racial/ethnic groups will make up 48% of the total U.S. population. Because of this demographic change, service and educational programs must change or adapt program delivery procedures to meet the needs of youth and families. As well, the tax-paying public is requiring greater accountability and paying increased attention to the quality of services rendered to youth and families.

Cultural Competence Defined

Cultural competence is defined as the ability of individuals and systems to work or

respond effectively across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person or organization being served. Culturally competent youth development workers are aware and respectful of the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and parenting styles of the audience being served.

Lynch and Hanson's *Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: A Guide for Working With Young Children and Their Families*(1998) established that cultural competence is something that we work toward; it is not achieved overnight or in a single workshop setting. Cultural competence is said to replace earlier ideas of cultural sensitivity and awareness, which are often embraced; however, typically, no corresponding action followed a change in individual behavior and no organizational change resulted.

Vital Ingredients

There are three vital ingredients to developing or accomplishing cultural competence. They are:

- Self-knowledge/awareness,
- Experience and knowledge about a particular culture, and
- Positive change or action for successful interaction with the identified culture.

These vital ingredients are not only paramount to individual cultural competence but to an organization's cultural competence.

Self-awareness is argued to be the most important element in developing effective collaboration with culturally different youth, families, and communities. Cultural self-awareness is the bridge to learning about other cultures. It is not possible to be truly sensitive to another culture until one is sensitive to his/her own and the impact that cultural customs, beliefs, values, and behaviors have on youth development practice. A professional's impression of a family's functioning style may be influenced by his/her own, sometimes unexamined, assumptions. Assumptions are those things we take for granted or accept as true without proof.

Youth practitioners may have to step outside their own framework. It may be difficult to see strength in individual or collective behaviors that reflect different assumptions. Practitioners must not put the real and imagined problems or deficits in the forefront of programming opportunities. At first, it may appear that a child's deficit may be a weakness, when in fact it may be the strength in their culture.

Program providers may have to look at culturally based strengths, resources, and assets. The Georgetown University Child Development Center indicated that agencies must have the wherewithal to change the way they provide services and increase their respective organization's cultural competence (Cross, Bazron, Isaacs, & Dennis, 1989).

Continuum of Competence

Individuals and organizations can measure their competence on a continuum developed by James Mason (1993). The five (5) progressive steps in his continuum are:

1. **Cultural destructiveness (cd):** The most negative end of the continuum is indicated by attitudes, policies, and practices that are ruinous to individuals and their cultures.

2. **Incapacity (ic):** The system or agency does not intentionally seek to be culturally ruinous or destructive; however, the system may lack the capacity to assist different cultures of individuals and/or communities.

3. **Blindness (b):** At the midpoint of the continuum, the system and its agencies provide services with the expressed intent of being unbiased. They function as if

the culture makes no difference and all the people are the same.

4. **Pre-competence (p):** Individuals and organizations move toward the positive end of the continuum by acknowledging cultural differences and making documented efforts to improve.

5. **Competence (c):** The most positive end of the continuum is indicated by acceptance and respect of cultural differences, continual expansion of cultural knowledge, continued cultural self-assessment, attention to the dynamics of cultural differences, and adoption of culturally relevant service delivery models to better meet needs.

Following is a Youth Development Program Cultural Competence Continuum Assessment for use especially by community-based programs. It is intended to help individuals self-assess the "active cultural competence" of their youth development program. The quiz is based on tenets of community program development (Boone, 1985) and James Mason's Competence Continuum (1993).

**Youth Development Program
Cultural Competence Continuum Quiz**

Circle the appropriate response.

1=never   2=almost never   3=sometimes   4=almost always   5=always

A. Programs are readily accessible by youth who are culturally different than the mainstream in my area/community.

   5   4   3   2   1

B. People of different cultures have reported that they are accepted in my programs.

   5   4   3   2   1

C. People of different cultures actively seek out participation in my programs/workshops/activities.

   5   4   3   2   1

D. People of different cultures actually attend my programs/workshops/activities.

   5   4   3   2   1

E. People of different cultures are invited to serve on my advisory boards/committees.

   5   4   3   2   1

F. At year-end, when all the "numbers" are tallied, the overall program reflects the cultural make-up of my area.

   5   4   3   2   1

G. People of different cultures actually serve in recognized leadership roles in my programs.

   5   4   3   2   1

H. During program planning, consideration is given to planning for the various cultures in my community/area.

     5   4   3   2   1

When you have completed this short quiz, tally your total score.

40 - 33 = cultural competence

32 - 25 = pre-competence

24 - 15 = blindness

14 - 19 = incapacity

8 - 13 = cultural destructiveness

Bonita E. Williams, 2001

Program Impact

Programs can consider cultural competence at the policy-making level and the service level, as well as at the administrative level. At the respective levels, consider the following if the organization or the individual youth development worker is striving to accomplish cultural competence.

Policy Level

- Appoint board/committee members from the community so that voices from all groups of people or stakeholders in the community participate in the decision-making process(es).

- Actively recruit a multi-ethnic and multiracial staff.

- Provide ongoing staff training and support to develop cultural competencies.

- Develop, mandate, and promote standards for culturally competent programs/activities/events.

Service Level

- Learn as much as possible about an individual's, family's, and/or community's culture, while at the same time understanding the influence of your own background on their responses to cultural differences.

- Know that for some program participants, additional services such as clothing, transportation, and assisting in resolving a child's problem in school are helpful. Possibly work with other community agencies to ensure that the needed services are provided.

- Adhere to traditions relating to gender and age that may play a part in certain cultures. Have an awareness of how different groups show respect, cooperate, communicate, etc.

Implications for Youth Development Programs

- Program accessibility and appeal to a broad range of youth and potential

volunteers are important.

- Program providers/educators must take risks and practice behaviors that may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable to involve cross-cultural audiences in their programs.

- Youth Development practitioners may have to increase their knowledge base of different cultures to begin the journey to accomplishing cross-cultural competence so programs may be designed for cultural inclusion of diverse youth and volunteers.

- A system of care is accountable and knows which audiences are not fully receiving the benefits of the agency's services.

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